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ABSTRACT

A review of the status of English language instruction in the Netherlands begins with an overview of the role of English in the society in general, and outlines the status of English use and instruction in the educational system at the secondary and postsecondary levels, the characteristics and training of English language instructors, the type and availability of instructional materials, educational administration and planning in relation to English teaching, English outside the educational system, British and American support, commercial opportunities related to English instruction, creative writing, language research, and other sources of information. There is a healthy willingness in the Netherlands to examine the aims and methods of English teaching and a strong movement toward the communicative approach. Roughly a quarter of the preservice teacher training program is devoted to pedagogy and methodology, producing better-equipped secondary school teachers. However, there is also resistance among teachers to extensive inservice training that adds to their already heavy workloads. (MSE)

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ENGLISH TEACHING PROFILE: NETHERLANDS

August 1986

The British Council
English Language and Literature Division

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English Teaching Profile

Netherlands

August 1986

1 Role and status of English

Owing to its small size and to the proximity of three large neighbours, the Netherlands has long been accustomed to the necessity of learning foreign languages. The common frontier with Germany and the kinship between the peoples and languages made it natural that German should be widely spoken and even more widely understood. The common frontier with French-speaking Belgium in the south-east and, more importantly, French domination of the country at the beginning of the nineteenth century resulted in the spread of the French language and widespread acceptance of French culture. From the seventeenth century onwards, maritime, colonial and commercial rivalry with Britain made knowledge of English a necessity. As a result of these many factors it became customary, and necessary, for educated Dutchmen to have some knowledge of English, French and German, and all three languages were included as compulsory subjects in the secondary school curriculum. Equal attention was paid to all three languages, but the post-war predominance of English as the first world language was quickly recognized by the Dutch, and English has now become the first foreign language of the country.

2 English within the education system

German, French and English (and, to a lesser extent, Spanish and Russian) are taught at the secondary level, and at least one modern foreign language is a compulsory subject for the school-leaving examination. Whereas equal attention was paid to all three languages in the past, changes in the educational system introduced in the late 1960s reduced the number of subjects for the final examination and, in the pre-academic secondary schools, pupils

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may choose which language or languages to study. It is estimated that ninety-five per cent choose English. A minimum of two periods a week (in the technical secondary schools) up to as many as four or five hours per week are devoted to the subject: periods are generally fifty minutes in length. The main emphasis in teaching has been on language rather than literature, but more attention is now being paid to the latter, and contemporary as well as classical texts are selected for study. In 1985 English (alone) was added to the curriculum for the last two years of primary school education.

University departments of English in the Netherlands have always been particularly strong in philology, and Dutch scholars have made notable contributions in this field. Although less time is now devoted to Old Norse, Gothic and Anglo-Saxon, there is still a marked bias towards language rather than literature in some departments and the production of English grammar studies and textbooks at the most advanced level remains a significant feature of their work. In literature studies the emphasis is on classical authors but in several university departments the study of contemporary works and Commonwealth literature flourishes. It may be said that in Dutch universities foreign language study is more detailed and thorough than in the United Kingdom, although, surprisingly, there is no tradition of students spending a year abroad: the course of studies leading to a first degree is normally completed in four years. There are departments of English at the universities of Amsterdam, Leiden, Groningen, Utrecht, Nijmegen and the Free University of Amsterdam, and English can now be studied as a major component of a European Studies degree. The economic and technical universities in the Netherlands also make some provision for the teaching of English language, as do most vocational schools and colleges of further education, where at least a reading knowledge is required to understand textbooks and reference works.

In recent years there has been a considerable expansion in organized and subsidized education for adults, both in day schools and in the so-called 'avond colleges' found all over the country. The Open University, set up in 1984 on British lines, has proved to be very popular although no languages are being offered at the time of writing. Mention should also be made of the many private evening schools throughout the Netherlands, where English is taught at various levels. The 'Volksuniversiteit', whose role is closest to that played by the Local Education Authorities in organizing evening classes, includes English among other languages in its programmes.

English literature

There is a wide acquaintance with English literature in the Netherlands which extends far beyond the school or university classrooms. There are a number of bookshops in the university towns and cities which are as well stocked as their counterparts in Britain, and English literature, whether of British or American origin, is the most important after Dutch literature. Evidence suggests that the book-buying public in the Netherlands represents a proportionately higher number of the population at large than in Britain.

Secondary level

The teaching of English literature in secondary schools is almost entirely at the discretion of the individual school or teacher. School-leaving examinations in literature are set internally. There is little literature content in the MAVO (Junior General Secondary) schools (examinations taken after four

years of secondary school education, generally considered to be below the GCE O-level standard). In the HAVO (Senior General Secondary) schools (examinations generally comparable to GCE A-level, taken after six years) literature is taught and in many of them reading lists are extensive - anything from ten to twenty works, displaying a wide variety of writers and genres. In this connection it is worth noting that the use of simplified and/or abridged texts is decreasing.

Tertiary level

English literature as such is formally studied only in the English departments of the universities (see above). For obvious reasons there is more emphasis than in Britain on language acquisition and this can sometimes work to the disadvantage of literary studies. The 'doctoraal' takes longer to acquire than the British BA, but there is less emphasis on essay writing. Students tend, particularly in their first year, to be less capable than their British counterparts of arranging literary arguments in written form. This is partly the result of having to write in English - the first time for many - but it probably also reflects an unfamiliarity with the essay as a means of testing knowledge. Composition courses constitute part of the first two or three years' study in some, if not all, university departments of English.

The 1986/87 Study Guide for the Department of English of the Free University of Amsterdam gives full information on language and literature courses. For details of research now being undertaken in English studies, reference is made to the most recent edition of Current Research in the Netherlands (Humanities 1981/Supplement 1982/83).

3 Teachers of English

It is only exceptionally - and usually at university level - that foreign qualifications are recognized. At other levels a British-trained teacher would normally be appointed as an unqualified teacher. In this connection it is important to note a fundamental change: up to the late 1970s there was still a shortage of qualified teachers in the Netherlands. However, the current situation is one in which it is difficult to find a job at all: the main reasons being, as in the UK, the falling numbers of pupils in the secondary schools and the effects of economic recession on financial provision.

Fully subsidized by the Ministry of Education and Science, a large number of in-service courses are offered by the English departments of the NLOs (teacher training colleges), the MOs (institutes for secondary school training) and the universities. There is a general tendency for in-service courses to be school-based, tailor-made schemes for a particular school (rather than exclusively subject-oriented). As has already been noted, English was added to the primary school curriculum (last two years only) in 1985, and an extensive retraining programme to equip primary school teachers for their new responsibilities was undertaken by the NLO and MO institutes. Teachers are free to attend vacation courses both in the Netherlands and in the UK, but in the case of the latter, expense proves to be an increasingly inhibiting factor. This is likewise true of any increased British activity in teacher training.

For a fuller view of the training of teachers, see Facts and Figures: Education and Science pp 14-15 listed in the Bibliography.

4 Materials support

Books are provided universally for children at primary school level: for the secondary schools, where children do not buy their own books (in the higher two forms), students are required to pay twenty-five per cent of the cost of each textbook and have to return the book at the end of the year. Teaching staff, both in universities and schools, have complete freedom in the choice of textbooks and other material: in general the role of the inspectorate is mainly an administrative one.

The Netherlands appears in fourth place on the list of importers of British books and there is certainly no shortage of textbooks. There is an increasing tendency for textbooks to be written in collaboration between British and Dutch authors and for them to be published in the Netherlands. There is no central scheme for the selection of materials: most schools use taped materials and some have language laboratories which, however, appear to be on their way out. The use of video and, more recently, computer-assisted language aids is increasing. The provision of educational aids and functional materials is at the individual discretion of each school.

NIAM (Netherlands Institute for Audiovisual Media) is the central co-ordinating post for the supply and hire of audio-visual materials (film, video, tape/slide sets), and also for computer software for schools.

Full statistics covering English textbooks used in Dutch schools are published by the Central Institute for Tests Development (CITO, Afdeling Voorlichting en Documentatie, Postbus 1034, 6801 MG Arnhem).

5 Educational administration in relation to English teaching

The administrative structures for the teaching of English are no different mutatis mutandis from other subjects in the curriculum. A full account is given in The Dutch Education System (Docinfo number 331E) published by the Ministry of Education and Science.

6 Development and planning of the teaching of English

Schools determine their own syllabus ('werkplan') which is approved by the inspectorate and by the local council (for public schools) or school board (for confessional schools). This freedom, however, is limited by the demands of the final leaving examinations which are set centrally for each type of school: even here it is noteworthy that some fifty per cent of the final examination mark is accounted for by the internal examinations set by the schools themselves.

The SLO (Foundation for Curriculum Development), at Enschede, was especially created to help schools and develop materials. The present trends in ELT are developing communicative competence (using a functional notional approach) and a general mixed-ability approach. There is great variation in the degree to which such trends are followed in individual schools.

For the inspection of English teaching (as for other subjects) see Schools Inspectorate in the Netherlands listed in the Bibliography. There are no specific school inspectors for separate subjects and as a consequence their interests in and grasp of the finer points of individual subjects depend largely on their personal experience.

The main professional organization for teachers of languages is the 'Vereniging van Leraren in Levende Talen' (Modern Language Association) which provides a forum through journals and conferences for teachers of foreign languages. (Secretary: Mrs L Walboom, Burg. van Kempensingel 13, 3055 BH Rotterdam.) For futher information see section 14.

7 English outside the education system

British radio programmes, and British and American television programmes, which account for twenty per cent of total time, are regularly relayed. All English language films are shown with sub-titles. These programmes and films, together with British and American pop music, are a considerable influence on the mass of the population, and the passive knowledge of English is as high in the Netherlands as in any other west-European country. Active use of the language is essential in commerce and is normal in academic and cultural circles. The Netherlands is the fourth largest importer of British books and, indeed, a number of English language magazines is published locally. Despite the loss of most of their overseas territories, the Dutch still have considerable interests abroad and the home country is an important international centre for communications and commerce. Advantage has been taken of these various factors to establish the Netherlands as a recognized centre for international conferences and courses. With rare exceptions, the language used for such activities is English.

Not surprisingly there is a large number of schools and institutions giving instruction in English as well as other foreign languages. The British Council in Amsterdam is the logical authority for the examinations of the Cambridge syndicate and holds a list of English-medium schools in the Netherlands. In recent years there has been a significant growth in the number of schools within the state system which have an English stream where pupils may take the International Baccalaureate or the GCE O-level (GCSE) examinations.

8 British support for the teaching of English

The British Council no longer conducts English classes, the Direct Teaching of English Operation (DTEO) in Amsterdam and The Hague having been closed in 1985. The British Council library in Amsterdam retains a good stock of ELT textbooks, tapes and other materials together with a small collection of language teaching films. The possibility of introducing a postal loan service is currently being investigated.

Contact with the English departments - both in the universities and teacher training colleges - is close. The study of English literature and linguistics in the universities is supported by the provision for visits by specialist tourists - academics as well as poets, dramatists and novelists. Each year the Council supports a national conference of a particular aspect of English studies, organized by one university and attended by representatives of all

the others. For a typical example see the timetable for the Council-sponsored conference 'Utopia and Dystopia', held in Amsterdam in 1984, and the report of the annual conference of University English Departments held in Groningen, in January 1986, to celebrate the centenary of the establishment of the first Chair of English Studies.

Support for the methodology of English language teaching is undertaken in collaboration with the teacher training colleges throughout the country. The Council makes provision for visiting lecturers, for study tours and for visitors and bursars programmes. The Council has also played a part in establishing the teacher-training centres, which have been set up in recent years by the teacher-training colleges, and which organize short courses and single-session activities on a regional basis. The efficiency of the Council's work is well attested in the Liber Amicorum presented by representatives of the Universities of Amsterdam, Groningen, Nijmegen and Maastrict.

9 American support for the teaching of English

For many years the American Embassy and the British Council organized jointly a series of public lectures on English and American literature. This was discontinued in 1979 as an economy measure, thus ending a long and successful collaboration.

There are Chairs for American Literature at the Universities of Nijmegen, Leiden and Utrecht, and for American History at the University of Leiden. A three-year degree course in American Studies is offered by the America Institute of the University of Amsterdam. (See pp 9/10 FUSE Quarterly, Nos 24/25 Amsterdam, December 1985.)

Occasional support for literature teaching is provided also by the Embassies of Canada and Ireland.

10 Other agency support

Nil, to the best of our knowledge.

11 Commercial opportunities

British publishers do not need reminding that the Netherlands is a wide-open, receptive market. The country appears fourth in the list of importers of British books, which are readily available (as, indeed, are books published in America). Given the freedom of choice granted to the class teachers, they must obviously be a prime target for commercial contact. After some years in the country, it is the writer's opinion that far more should be done by way of seminars/lectures/conferences by British ELT authors to interest both those in the teacher-training colleges and, especially, those who organize the programmes of the teachers' centres now functioning across the country. Given the recession and the shortage of funds which affect both colleges and centres, far more could be done by British publishers, especially since visits are essentially one-day affairs: a considerable amount of ground could be covered in a fortnight.

In the wake of the ever-increasing use of computers in education generally, the Commercial Section of the British Embassy (Lange Voorhout 10, 2514 ED The Hague) has for some time vigorously pursued openings in the Dutch market for British hardware. Given the strength of the indigenous industry, however, one is forced to conclude that the market for software can be penetrated more easily. This is also a market that might be pursued through the teacher-training colleges and teachers' centres.

The British Council library carries comprehensive lists of recognized British schools of English as well as details of British Council and other (approved) summer schools.

12 Creative writing

See Literature in the Netherlands

I. History, Production, Organizations and Periodicals.

II. National and International Policy.

Also publications of the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, FS-28/29-E, 1982.

For an account of local publishing activity generally, see the article by Darley Anderson and Jan Michael, published in The Bookseller, August 1982, pp 536 et seq. Also Lijstenboek, published by the Association for the Promotion of the Book Trade; 1985 edition.

There is a Tolkien Society (Tolkien Society 'Unquendor', Secretary: Mrs A Ponsen, Oostdwarsgracht 1, 2312 PM Leiden).

13 Current research

The study of Anglo-Dutch cultural relations in the 16th-19th centuries is the particular purpose of the Sir Thomas Browne Institute of the University of Leiden (P N van Eyckhof 4, 2311 BV Leiden).

There is also a programme of collaborative research in historical linguistics, between the English Departments of the Universities of Amsterdam and Manchester.

More details can be obtained from Current Research in The Netherlands, published by The Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research (see Bibliography).

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15 General statement

There is a healthy willingness in the Netherlands to reconsider and examine the aims and methods of English teaching. Stimulated by the National Foundation for Curriculum Development (SLO) at Enschede, the teacher-training colleges (NLOs) and also the Modern Language Association, there is a strong movement to a communicative approach in the teaching of English as of other languages. This movement has also influenced the extensive retraining schemes of primary school teachers undertaken in recent years, made necessary by the introduction of English at that level. Against this enthusiasm must be set the increasing unwillingness of many teachers to participate in prolonged in-service courses, a direct consequence of the considerably increased workload they now carry. Ad hoc tailor-made meetings of shorter duration remain popular. It is also relevant in this connection that since the early 1970s, when the present teacher-training colleges were founded, secondary school teachers have set out on their careers far better equipped than many of their predecessors. Roughly a quarter of the 4-4½ year training course is now being devoted to pedagogy and methodology, including various forms of teaching practice in schools.